



Tip Sheet for Visual and Craft Artist Fellowship Applicants

Okay, first the bad news. There is no magic formula for developing a successful fellowship application. A lot depends on variables beyond your control, like who else applies and who the panelists will be for the review process. But there are things you can do in advance that may increase the competitiveness of your application.

This tip sheet is about strategies you can consider to put together a better application. But to begin with we want you to keep in mind the following first principles:

- 1) Your work samples will be the most important component of your application.
- 2) Are you eligible? Eligibility is described in the fellowship program overview. While not terribly stringent, there are a few restrictions so be sure you qualify before going to the trouble of putting together an application. If you have questions, call the program staff.
- 3) Read the guidelines and follow the instructions in AGO. The tip sheet is intended to supplement not substitute for the category guidelines or application instructions.
- 4) Submit everything that's asked for, but only what is asked for. Unrequested material—extra work samples, press clippings, letters of recommendation, etc.—will not be considered.
- 5) Get your application in on time. The deadline is Monday, November 2, 2015 at 11:59 p.m.
- 6) Your work samples will be the most important component of your application. (Did we get that point across?)

Arts Grants Online (AGO)

Unfortunately, if you're looking for tips on how to navigate the AGO site, this is not where you'll find that information. There are step-by-step instructions on the site. Though we imagine you will find the site easier to use than you may anticipate, start early to give yourself extra time if you're new to the system.

What follows are some strategic tidbits on how you might approach the different elements of the application.

Applicant Profile

This is fairly straightforward. The system will not let you submit the application unless you have filled in all the required fields in this section. Otherwise, there's not too much strategy required here. A couple of reminders:

- Please provide complete and current contact information. This information goes into our database and your entry on our web site. If the information changes after you apply, correct your profile and get in touch with us so that we can make the changes on our database.
- The system alphabetizes by the name you put in the Last Name field, so if you have a double last name (e.g., Smedley-Quackenbush) put it all in the Last Name text box.

Narrative

The meat of the application begins with the narrative. But before you plunge in, be sure to respond to the questions about discipline and genre, as they determine which panel will review your work.

There is also a question about collaborations. If you hire someone to help you fabricate a work that rarely qualifies as a collaboration for grant application purposes. However, if you have one or more partners in your artmaking that have significant creative input and say-so in the result, then that probably does make it collaborative. Each collaborator must meet the eligibility criteria and a combined résumé should be included. If your collaboration is yet to happen, then applying as a team is probably not a good idea because you don't have work samples in common to show the panel. While you can show examples of each collaborator's work, realize that teams are limited to the same number of work samples as any individual applicant. And, perhaps more importantly, understand that you're asking the panel to imagine (and appreciate) a composite result that they can't actually see, which might be a lot to ask.

On the AGO site, you will find three text boxes in which you will answer the narrative questions. Each has a specific character limit with an overall total of 4,500 for all three. You should be able to cut and paste from a Word document into the boxes, but be aware that you're likely to lose your formatting in the transition. Also, different browsers count characters differently: Mozilla, for instance, counts two characters for spaces where Explorer counts only one. Which means that you can say only about 85 percent as much using Mozilla. This may not be an unmitigated evil, but if you're long-winded (or just have a lot of meaty points you're dying to make), you may have a reason to choose a more generous browser. Overall, however, Mozilla is the recommended browser for its compatibility to the AGO system.

But, to the chase. A narrative is required to tell the panel how you would spend the award should you receive the grant, how the grant will assist in your artistic development, and why it's important that you receive the grant at this time. But it is secondary in importance to the work samples you will submit. If you find yourself agonizing over your narrative, you are probably spending too much time on it. Here are a few suggestions and reminders to help you craft an appropriate statement.

- Get to the point. You don't have unlimited space, so save your lyrical and elliptical expositions for another forum. A typed page (roughly the space you have) is plenty of room to respond fully to the questions.
- This is not a project grant. You do not need to submit a budget. You shouldn't even be tempted because there's not place to do so. While you can propose an artist project to undertake with the grant award, it is not required. The fellowship is intended to give artists doing strong work some resources to continue exploring their work. Think about it as a grant for research and development.
- What you should be able to describe in your narrative is where you are now with your work and where you would like to take it—the trajectory you see your work taking between now and the end of the grant year. Someone reading your narrative after having seen your work samples should say to herself, "That makes sense. That's a good direction for this artist to take his work."
- If your work involves unusual processes or is difficult to read in the work samples, you can use the narrative to amplify the panelists' understanding. The narrative can also be used to discuss the significance of your work, though caution is appropriate here. There's a difference between

saying that your work addresses certain themes and saying what it means or, heaven forfend, touting its quality. If you feel the urge, take a 20-minute walk and get a grip on yourself.

- You're applying for a craft or visual artist fellowship not a writer's fellowship, so you don't have to worry about literary style points. Nonetheless, a clear, clean, focused narrative helps demonstrate your knowledge of your work and where you would like to take it. Here are a few general reminders:
 - Talk about your work, not about yourself. These grants are intended to help you develop your work, not to help you address emotional, financial, or existential issues in your life.
 - Be descriptive, not interpretive. Avoid telling the reader what your work means ("The sun is a symbol for salvation, while the flowers suggest rebirth...") or how well it conveys your message ("The use of ashes subtly underscores the theme of transience...").
 - Use active voice as a general rule ("I plan to experiment with larger-format paintings" or "The work dominates the space"). Passive voice typically slows the reader down and often creates an unnecessary ambiguity or ungainliness in the syntax ("The work is envisioned as a large, outdoor sculpture" or "Of especial note is the placement of the gargoyle...").
 - Describe unusual processes or visual presentations by breaking them down into a sequence of production or experience ("Visitors enter the installation through a narrow door..." or "I use a three-stage firing process...").
 - Panelists are chosen from different areas of craft and the visual arts, but you can assume they will all be conversant with general concepts and terms and have at least a basic familiarity with a variety of media. If you are discussing specific processes or techniques in your area of specialty, however, it may require some additional explanation. Avoid gratuitous artspeak or academic jargon, unless you're sure the panel will be receptive, you're confident about your ability to use it correctly, and it's relevant to your work. Though someone has doubtless written about the semiotics of crackle finishes on glass, you'd be better off saving those observations for your next museum catalogue. There's little to be gained by pretentiousness.
 - The best gauge of your success with your narrative is to have a non-arts friend read it. If she doesn't understand it, that's probably a good sign you're not being clear.

Finally, call the program officer if you have questions about the application. We are willing to review drafts of narratives if we receive them at least two weeks before the deadline.

Résumé

Résumés are required but are only reviewed as supporting material to the work samples and narrative. They can provide information to panelists about timing and background that may be relevant during the final decision-making process.

Generally, résumés should be:

- Artist résumés. That is, they should focus on your activities as an artist, including exhibitions, commissions, collections that have acquired your work, residencies, workshops taught or taken, lectures, panels, education, employment, awards, etc.
- Abbreviated. You can submit the 30-page version of your résumé, but it may not always make the impression you imagine it will, either on the panel or on the program assistant who will have to print it out and copy it. A good length to aim for is three to five pages.

Work Samples

While all components of the application are required, none is more important than the work samples in the evaluation process. Panelists are instructed to make their recommendations using artistic merit as their guiding criterion, so it is essential that applicants choose strong work that is well-represented by the work samples. The good news about the AGO application system is that it will allow panelists to spend more time with your work because they will view it online in the first round—rather than in a time-restricted presentation to the panel as a group. Here are a few general principles to keep in mind as you choose your work samples for submission:

- A former fellowship winner once remarked, “If you have to choose between a so-so image of a really strong work and a great image of a good work, choose the better image.” While we can’t recommend this as an absolute rule, the general point is well-taken: the presentation of your work samples can make or break your application. Poorly focused, framed, cropped, or exposed images or video documentation do not convey the level of professionalism panelists expect—and it’s easy for them to pass over your work quickly as a result. You can document your own work, if you’re confident in your ability; there are good how-to guides available like Russell Hart’s *Photographing Your Artwork*. If not, it’s a wise investment to hire a professional objects photographer to prepare a high-quality portfolio for you, or a competent digital videographer to document your time-based work. It is money well spent if you plan to apply for grants, submit work to competitions, send work to commercial galleries and museums for consideration, or any of a number of other opportunities where first impressions matter.

Be sure to read the tutorial about preparing your work samples entitled Image Preparation by clicking on the link in the guidelines. The information there will help you prepare your images for uploading to the AGO system.

- Once you have good work samples, you need to choose which work samples to submit—because there’s a ten-image limit (or five minutes for time-based work). Two general recommendations are:
 - Submit a coherent body of work. You may be multi-talented artist who is facile in several media, but it’s generally not to your advantage to show the panel all you can do. Making a statement about a single body of work is difficult enough in ten slides (or five minutes); if you dilute the focus, you risk confusing the panel about who you are and what you do as an artist. Even with the first round online, there are a lot of images to consider so panelists will only have limited time to assess your work. Consequently, it’s usually better to present a single artistic vision.
 - Submit work completed in the last three years. Fellowship grants are not lifetime achievement awards. They are offered biennially and are intended to recognize artists whose recent work is exemplary. Can artists submit older work? They can, but

panelists will be instructed to give work completed in last three years a clear preference—unless there is a *very* compelling reason.

- The final piece of the puzzle is to present your work samples in a way that tells the story of your recent artistic production. Even though the panel will not see images in three banks of three as in the days of slides, you still have the opportunity to create a short visual narrative about your work, describing the arc or direction your work has taken during the past three years. Keep in mind that:
 - - Images will be viewed—online in the first round, and projected in the final round—sequentially, a pattern that allows you to show development and/or relationships you consider important. Like a short story, you haven't got a lot of space in which to tell a complex narrative. Pick one or two things you want the panel to notice about your work and its development and make those points clearly.
 - In the final round, digital images are projected to a size of three to four feet across. This matters. Images look very different on the screen than they do projected on the wall. While digital technology has come a long way, images can still lose detail and sharpness when projected. If you have access to a data projector, take the time to look at your work through this medium. It may affect your selections.
 - Some work is just very hard to read in a still, single-perspective form. Details or multiple shots may be necessary to convey the complexity of the work. Consider how a viewer might experience a work (like an installation) as you select the images. For some artists working with time-based work, digital video may be a more appropriate form of documentation. Keep in mind that the total running time shouldn't exceed five minutes. But the same general principle and potential to tell a story about your work applies to moving image presentation as to digital images. Call the staff if you have questions about how best to present your work to the panel.

One last question concerns how many works you should submit. And the answer is: it depends. If you are submitting JPEGs, you should submit 10 images. Submitting fewer begs the question of why you don't have 10 images to show the panel. But the 10 images do not have to represent 10 distinct works. You can include details or alternate views of work, if that will help the panelists appreciate subtleties not apparent in a single view. Generally speaking, most artists should show no fewer than six different works in the 10 allotted images.

For time-based work, or for more complex or time-consuming work, like installations, three or four works would probably be safe. Ultimately, it is up to the panel to determine whether they have enough to go on, but these rules of thumb should provide a guide.

Work Sample Descriptions

If you are uploading images onto the AGO site, you will have the opportunity to describe the works as you upload them onto the site. This information will attach to the thumbnails of the work that you see on your screen and be part of the PDF of your application that you will print out for your records. In general, you will want to include the:

- Title (if it has one—some artists may substitute a functional description, like “vase” or “quilt,” in the absence of a title)

- Date of completion (the year is sufficient)
- Medium (is it stone or ceramic? Is it an acrylic on canvas, or does it also include collage elements? Etc. It is also appropriate to include some information about process here, if relevant to the viewer's understanding.)
- Dimensions (the order is typically height by width by depth)

On the AGO site, there are specific text boxes for title, date of completion, and dimensions. For the medium/media, you will need to enter the information in the text box entitled Artwork Description. For artists submitting time-based work, you will use the work sample description form attached to the application. Because of the nature of the work, you should also include short annotations—no more than two sentences per work—to explain such things as:

- Technical aspects, like the operation or sequencing of a work: "Crossing the installation threshold, the viewer triggers an electric eye that sets the toy train in motion. The propeller and whirlpool are turned on in succession in 15 second intervals."
- Features that are not evident in the work sample: "The video in the installation is a continuous tape loop of the artist pushing a rock up a hill with Ravel's *Bolero* as the soundtrack."

Artists submitting JPEGs may also annotate their work, space permitting, in the Artwork Description text box. However, this **should not** be necessary in most instances. Please keep in mind the following principles in deciding whether or not the additional information you're dying to tell the panel is relevant.

What we really don't want to see in annotations are:

- Descriptions that tell the panel something they can see clearly in the work sample: "This is a picture of a house on a hill."
- What the work is supposed to mean or how the viewer should think or feel about it: "The faded flowers represent death and decay" or "The play of light and dark creates a dynamic tension in the foreground."
- Who bought, commissioned, or exhibited the work or any awards it has won. (This is résumé material.)
- Step-by-step details of conception or fabrication. These are best left for the narrative, though an abbreviated version can be incorporated into the medium description, as in the example below.
- Your personal philosophy of life: To the degree it's relevant to your work—and many times, it's not—the appropriate place for such ruminations is in the narrative.

Example 1: Untitled, 2010, handwoven, screen printed, machine embroidered cotton and satin, with dyed threads and yarns, 36 x 30".

This entry reveals something about the artist's process, without a separate annotation.

Example 2: *Sentimental Journey*, 2010, mixed media installation: video monitor, video tape loop, cable, asphalt, assorted car parts, dirt, leaves, Kleig lights, 10 x 15 x 25'.

Mixed media generally benefits from further elaboration. Often this can be achieved simply by more detail as to what “mixed” entails. If, however, the “mixing” involves more than accretion or layering, and especially if there is some kind of video, sound, or kinetic element, the entry could be accompanied by an annotation.

This is probably more than you would ever want or need to know about applying for a visual or craft artist fellowship grant. However, if you still have questions, do not hesitate to call or e-mail me at the Arts Council. You can reach me at jeff.pettus@ncdcr.gov or (919) 807-6513.

Best of luck with your application.